



State of Alaska
Sarah Palin, Governor



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NEWS RELEASE

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Testing for Bird Flu in Alaska: The First Year of Concerted Effort

(Juneau) - As the year ends, wildlife officials in Alaska are reviewing data gathered in 2006 on avian influenza in the state. With all the results from various avian flu sampling efforts having returned from laboratories, scientists can safely conclude that Asian H5N1 was not found in Alaska in 2006.

At the beginning of 2006, scientists were concerned that a highly pathogenic strain of bird flu, known as Asian H5N1, might show up first in wild birds in Alaska and then spread into the rest of North America. Because Alaska is considered an avian crossroads where migratory birds from several continents mix, the state was thought to be a likely entry point for the disease into North America. State and federal wildlife managers made plans to sample wild birds and prepare possible responses should Asian H5N1 turn up in Alaska.

"Roughly 21,000 wild birds in Alaska were sampled for avian flu by federal and state agencies last year," said Tom Rothe, waterfowl coordinator with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). "That number exceeded state and federal goals to sample 15,000 to 20,000 birds from the 26 target species we consider likely carriers of Asian H5N1 because of their migratory patterns, association with outbreak areas in Asia, or other factors," he said.

No cases of Asian H5N1 were found in the Alaska samples, Rothe reported. However, as expected, other low pathogenic forms of avian flu did turn up in the wild birds sampled. Of the samples collected by ADF&G, about 7 percent tested positive for some sort of low-pathogenic avian influenza. "That was about what we expected," Rothe said. "Waterfowl are known to naturally harbor various types of low-pathogenic avian influenza throughout the year."

ADF&G assisted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture with the sampling, contributing about 1,600 of the 21,000 samples from Alaska. Rothe said ADF&G augmented federal sampling efforts by expanding sampling at existing bird-banding camps. ADF&G annually captures and bands ducks at camps at the Susitna Flats near Anchorage and the Minto Flats near Fairbanks. Sandhill cranes are captured and banded at the Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge in Fairbanks. "The largest proportion of the live birds we sampled were northern pintails and mallards," Rothe said. "The pintails were one of the primary target species."

In addition to the live birds sampled, ADF&G officials collected samples from 450 birds shot by hunters at Susitna Flats, Palmer Hay Flats, and Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuges. Half

of these samples were taken from pintails and mallards, but green-winged teal and wigeon were sampled as well. Waterfowl hunting seasons, along with the 2006 sampling efforts, will end in late January.

Tom Rothe declared the year's sampling program in Alaska a qualified success. "Even though thousands of birds were tested, scientists handled just a small fraction of the millions of wild birds that congregate in Alaska," he said. "While we're reassured from our targeted sampling efforts, we can't say with 100 percent certainty that we're clean."

Biologists from ADF&G and other wildlife agencies are summarizing results of the 2006 samples and sifting the "lessons learned" from this unprecedented national disease surveillance effort. "We expect Fish and Game to sample more birds during 2007," Rothe said, "but the extent of our work will depend on a lot of factors, including global trends in H5N1."

For more avian influenza information and monitoring efforts in Alaska, visit:
<http://www.avianflu.alaska.gov/>

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